

“Is It Broken?”

By Stephen Michael Kellat

LISNews Netcast Network

I wind up asking that question when it comes to the American Library Association. The ALA is an organization with a long history. In looking at its current actions today, I just wind up with feelings of dread foreboding when I wonder if something may be wrong structurally.

The big worry that rises now is promotion. There are plenty of campaigns one can see in print, hear on the radio, and watch on TV promoting green initiatives as well as public safety. In Nevada the Department of Public Safety does have ads distributed that help promote safety messages. Markedly absent from that marketplace of ideas, though, is libraries.

The current mess that Ohio libraries find themselves in helps illustrate this problem. It is hard to establish your credibility with voters if they don't think you exist or otherwise would not notice you. Mass protests in places like Iran quickly gain attention. What tools do libraries and librarians have to raise such hordes to make a point heard? This whole line of thinking, though, reflects a reactive mindset. When you have to react and play defense, somebody else is able to define the situation in ways that may end up being adverse to you.

The odds are not always in your favor when you have to play defense. When it comes to matters of funding via tax dollars, a key danger is that the other side could smear you as being devoted solely to your own paycheck instead of the public good. In a situation in which libraries are being cut in addition to other sectors of governmental activity such as community-based mental health services, the possibility also exists of those playing defense being turned against each other. An unfortunate turn of events that thankfully has yet to occur would be library advocates, mental health services advocates, and food bank operators turning on each other over how deep each was getting cut.

Is it the lot of libraries and librarians in life to always play defense? Should libraries always be thankful for what they get and be silent about any need for more funding? That's not a healthy way to live whether it is a person or an institution. Only ever playing defense can perhaps lead to always accepting defeat.

Although it may surprise some librarians out there, some of the stronger and more vocal supporters of Ohio libraries are Republicans. Yes, that's right. A Democrat Governor submitted to a legislature in which Democrats dominate a budget that would hurt libraries. Through the actions of Republican members of the legislature's conference committee, the cuts are presently being stalled on the road to enactment.

One lesson that can be learned from this incident underway is that it is necessary at times to think in the long term. How do people regard libraries in our communities? Do

citizens even remember that they are patrons of libraries through their tax dollars and have available to them a valuable resource? What is the image of the profession in communities?

While there are ALA outreach efforts in existence like ilovelibraries.org, a major problem with it is that if I only learn of the site's existence through reading ALA committee documents how would the average citizen find it? Serendipitous searching resulting in a patron stumbling upon advocacy materials is not a proactive strategy. Blanketing airwaves with public service announcements in addition to print advertising would be far more of an active strategy.

A common complaint about blogging and blog posts is that there rarely are constructive steps forward suggested. At this point it would seem prudent to mention a few strategies. These are initial thoughts others should feel free to build upon.

For those academic institutions home to ALA accredited graduate programs in library science, there are likely journalism and mass communication programs also contained therein. How difficult would it be to get a couple top seniors in public relations to develop a series of public service announcements libraries could seed with local radio and television stations? This does not necessarily have to be a national thing as regional flavor would help emphasize more the local nature of libraries.

The LISNews Netcast Network can also serve as a proving ground for talking to media. If you've never done a telephone interview before, you could see about arranging a bit of a live-fire practice round with the network. LISTen always seeks new stories and if you want to talk about something cool at your library you just have to ask. Talking to the Network is going to be in many cases the easiest practice possible before you have to face more mainstream journalists.

The last possible strategy is to continually assess who you serve. Demographic shifts do happen. Economic downturns can accelerate them.

In the end, though, a question must be raised: Where is the ALA in all of this?

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